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# The Last Byzantine Historiographer and his Audience

This is the first piece of advice that Dionysius of Halicarnassus gives those determined to engage in historiography:[1]

> πρῶτόν τε καὶ σχεδὸν ἀναγκαιότατον ἔργον ἁπάντων ἐστὶ τοῖς γράφουσιν πᾶσιν ἱστορίας ὑπόθεσιν ἐκλέξασθαι καλὴν καὶ κεχαρισμένην τοῖς ἀναγνωσομένοις.[2] (*Pomp*. 3)

Kritobulos of Imbros, the last Byzantine historiographer failed as early as the first step – at least compared to Dionysius. In his letter addressed to Gnaeus Pompeius Geminus, the historian of Halicarnassus criticises Thucydides – among other things – for depicting a war that destroyed many Greek cities and people, so readers keen on learning more about Greek affairs are predisposed to regard the historiographer's work with aversion.[3]

Although Kritobulos wrote *in the fullest detail* about the destruction of only one Greek city,[4] this would have hardly served him as an excuse. And not only because this one city happened to be Constantinople, and its loss meant also losing the last remains of the culture that was so precious to Dionysius and the Greek people, but also because the protagonist of Kritobulos' work was the very person that brought such destruction to the City and Byzantium.

On the first pages of the *autographical* manuscript of the work entitled *Syngraphēs historiōn* preserved in the library of the Serai (*cod. Seragliensis* G. İ. 3) we can read the Byzantine historiographer's letter of dedication

[1] This paper was supported by János Bolyai Research Scholarship of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and OTKA NN 104456.

[2] "The first, and one may say the most necessary, task for writers of any kind of history is to choose a noble subject and one pleasing to their readers." Translated by Roberts, W. Rhys.

[3] Cf. D.H. *Pomp*. 3.

[4] The work consisting of five books follows the events from the enthronement of Mehmed II in 1451 to 1467. Constituting as much as one third of the work, the first book describes the conquest of Constantinople, while the other four of the books are about the sultan's further conquests.

addressed to Mehmed II the Conqueror.[5] Kritobulos recommends his writing as a simple servant (δοῦλος εὐτελής) to the sultan, who, in his opinion, has completed greater and more illustrious deeds than any former monarch or general. However, having completed the letter full of adulation (that later on provoked revulsion in most Byzantinologists),[6] in the *prooimion* and the *paraitēsis* evoking classical models, the author goes on to address his words to his compatriots.

The present paper explores the relationship and correlations between this latter audience and the historian who devoted his work to this (Byzantine) audience as well as the sultan. Two paths are available for such analysis: we can depart from the ambivalent situation that Kritobulos got himself into when he chose Mehmed II as the protagonist of his account and examine the subtle and resourceful rhetorical methods that the Byzantine historiographer implements in order to justify his choice of topic to his compatriots. Or we can observe our historiographer and his audience from a wider perspective and look for clues in the text that reveal the more general aspects of the complex system of relations between the author and the readers. Although the first choice seems more exciting, holds out more established results and even readers may find it more attractive, still – forgetting about Dionysius' word of warning – we now opt for the latter, more comprehensive (and maybe less attractive) subject matter.

The relations of Byzantine historiography and its audience represent an area yet unexplored. The Byzantinologists trying hard to keep up with colleagues researching classical philology just began to approach this *terra incognita* in the last decade.[7] I now highlight only three of the countless questions emerging in the process of mapping out this field, hoping that the analysis of Kritobulos' work reveals additional data that help answer these questions.

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[5] Originally, two letters of dedication were written for his work. About the letters of dedication see Grecu, V.: Kritobulos aus Imbros. *Byzantinoslavica* 17 (1957) 1–17, esp. 4–7; Reinsch, D. R. (ed.): *Critobuli Imbriotae Historiae*. (Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantinae vol. 22.) Berlin–New York 1983, 18–27. About the manuscript see Reinsch 5–6.

[6] On the scientific criticism of Krtitobulos and his work see Reinsch (n. 5) 48–49.

[7] See, for example: Croke, B.: Tradition and Originality in Photius Historical Reading. In Burke, J. et al. (eds.): *Byzantine Narrative. Papers in Honour of Roger Scott*. Melbourne 2006, 59–70; we can also find interesting data at Kaldellis, A.: The Byzantine Role in the Making of the Corpus of Classical Greek Historiography: A Preliminary Investigation. *JHS* 132 (2012) 71–85.

The first one is about the channels through which historical works reached their audience in Byzantium, and how these channels changed between the 4th and 15th century or if they changed at all. The studies of Brian Croke trying to find an answer to this question reveal that the majority of Byzantine historiographers – similarly to their antique predecessors – designed their narratives not merely for solitary contemplation but also for oral interpretation before an audience.[8] Croke compiled data that seem to support the above statement mainly from the period between the 7th and 12th centuries. These data and evidence may be divided in three groups. The first group consists of the *loci* that refer to public performances in a text-like manner; such reference may be found, for example, in Thophylact Simocatta, who modestly mentions having had to disrupt reading his historical account because the audience broke out in tears while he was recounting Emperor Maurice's death (cf. VIII, 12.3–4).[9] The second group is made up of the rhetoric phrases addressing the audience like, for example, "future listener" (ἀκουσόμενος) in Eustathius or "for the friendly listener" (πρὸς φιλήκοον ἀκοήν) in Psellos or "oh, listeners" (ὦ ἀκροαταί) in Genesius.[10] The third and last group of evidences includes manuscripts. The traces of oral recitation can be discovered not only in the direct references but also in the manuscript tradition. The famous Madrid manuscript of John Skylitzes' work, the *Synopsis of Histories* displays a graphic evidence of this: beyond the beautifully structured semi-uncial letters, its clear and exaggerated punctuation demonstrates that the text was intended for oral interpretation.[11] Besides public recitation solitary reading (also carried out loud) was naturally present in Byzantium, too. According to Croke signs like the frequent occurrence of the verb ἀναγιγνώσκειν in the texts may show this.[12]

If we start investigating Kritobulos' work for similar clues, we need not search long; already the *prooimion* includes quite a few. In the opening sentence of the introduction we can read the following:

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[8] Croke, B.: Uncovering Byzantium's historiographical audience. In Macrides, Ruth (ed.): *History as Literature in Byzantium*. Farnham 2010, 25–53, esp. 29–30, 44–46.

[9] Cf. Croke (n. 8) 29.

[10] Eustathius, *Report on the Capture of Thessalonica* 18. 6; Psellos *Chron*. 6. 21; Genesius, *On Imperial Reigns* 4. 3; cf. Croke (n. 8) 40–41, 44.

[11] Burke, J.: The Madrid Skylitzes as an Audio-Visual Experiment. In Burke, J. et al. (eds.): *Byzantine Narrative. Papers in Honour of Roger Scott*. Melbourne 2006, 137–148, esp. 142–146.

[12] Croke (n. 8) 37, 45.

> Κριτόβουλος ὁ νησιώτης, τὰ πρῶτα τῶν Ἰμβριωτῶν, τὴν ξυγγραφὴν τήνδε ξυνέγραψε δικαιώσας μὴ πράγματα οὕτω μεγάλα καὶ θαυμαστὰ ἐφ᾽ ἡμῶν γεγονότα μεῖναι ἀ ν ή κ ο υ σ τ α[13] (Krit. I, 1.1)

Then a few lines later we find this:

> τὰ μὲν γὰρ παλαιὰ τῶν ἔργων πρεσβύτατα ὄντα καὶ μέγιστα δυσπαράδεκτά πώς εἰσι καὶ ε ἰ ς ἀ κ ο ὴ ν ἔ ρ χ ε τ α ι μ ό γ ι ς.[14] (Krit. I, 1.2).

Although the expressions ἀνήκουστα and εἰς ἀκοὴν ἔρχεται do not refer to an oral recitation so directly as the notes of Thophylact Simocatta, Psellos, Genesius and Eustathius, they lead us to the conclusion that in the 15th century orality continued to assume an important role in the process of taking in historical works. While phrasing his historical work, Kritobulos must have also imagined his listening audience. We can spot traces and words alluding to both oral recitation and solitary reading, although the phrase indicating the latter is not the usual: the future participle (ξυνεσομένους) derived from the verb σύνειμι is most likely to apply to intense solitary reading.[15]

But what was the composition of the audience and what expectations did it have towards historiographers? Generally speaking, the listeners and readers (as well as the authors) of historical works in Byzantium mainly included the representatives of a narrow social class, the members of the ecclesiastical and secular aristocracy.[16] The majority of this community received excellent education, grew up reading classical authors (mainly Thucydides and Herodotus), and, through the thorough knowledge and study of historiographers, developed a firm idea of the right style, subject matter, structure and proportions of historical accounts.

Being readers themselves, Byzantine historiographers were also well aware of these expectations and they strived to take the needs of the audience into

[13] "Noble islander Kritobulos of Imbros wrote this historical account, for he thought it right to ensure that such great and wonderful things that happened in our time should not remain *unheard*,…" For the English translation of Kritobulos' texts I have consulted with the following edition: Riggs, Ch. T.: *History of Mehmed the Conqueror*. Westport 1970. (Reprint)

[14] "ancient and enormous as they may be, olden deeds are to a certain extent incomprehensible, and *are hardly heard* (...) ."

[15] παραιτοῦμαι δὲ τούς τε νῦν τούς τε χρόνῳ ὕστερόν ποτε ξυνεσομένους τῇδε τῇ ξυγγγραφῇ. (Krit. I, 3.1)

[16] Naturally, the audience was not entirely homogeneous; on this, see Croke (n. 8) 28, 32–34, 46–47, 53.

account when composing their works. Historians' notes responding to the needs of the audience also justify this assumption.

For example, in his contemporary history entitled *Chronographia,* Psellos apologizes to his friend for not recounting every detail in order (ἐφεξῆς διεξιέναι) with great precision (ἐξακριβοῦσθαι), and for not describing the events that thorough historiographers (τοῖς ἀκριβέσι τῶν συγγραφέων) usually do mention (εἴθισται λέγειν). Psellos then goes on to say that since his friend only requests a so called summary and not a historical account (τὴν συγγραφήν), he omitted several things worth mentioning, did not either organize the events according to the Olympiads and divide years in winter and summer seasons as *the historiographer* (ὁ συγγραφεύς) did, but simply compiled the most important ones using his memory.[17]

Psellos' apologies confirm that when writing contemporary history, authors had to observe certain editing principles also well known and expected by the audience. The most important ones included the chronological order of events and their precise recount strictly observing this order. The text also reveals that these principles were also accompanied by a historiographer's example, in Psellos' case it was Thucydides, whose name is hidden behind the word ὁ συγγραφεύς.

Then four centuries later the Athenian historiographer will also serve as a pattern to Kritobulos,[18] who in his *prooimion* rephrases the guidelines described by Psellos:

> γράψω δὴ καθέκαστα ὡς ἐγένετο[19] ἀκριβῶς τούς τε λόγους ξυναρμόζων τοῖς ἔργοις τά τε ἔργα μηδαμοῦ τῶν καιρῶν ἀποδιιστὰς ἔν τε τοῖς προσώποις καὶ τοῖς καιροῖς τὴν γιγνομένην τάξιν μ ε τ ὰ τ ο ῦ π ρ ο σ ή κ ο ν τ ο ς σῴζων.[20] (Krit. I, 1.4)

[17] Τὰ μὲν οὖν ἐφεξῆς πάντα διεξιέναι, ἕκαστόν τε ἐξακριβοῦσθαι ἀφ' οἵων ἀρχῶν εἰς οἷα τέλη κατήντησε, συντάξεις τε καταλέγειν καὶ στρατοπεδείας, ἀκροβολισμούς τε καὶ ἀψιμαχίας καὶ τἄλλα ὁπόσα εἴθισται λέγειν τοῖς ἀκριβέσι τῶν συγγραφέων, ὡς μακροῦ καιροῦ καὶ λόγου δεόμενα εἰς τὸ παρὸν ἀναβάλλομαι· οὐ γάρ με τὴν συγγραφὴν, φίλτατε πάντων ἀνδρῶν, φιλοτιμοτέραν, ἀλλὰ κεφαλαιωδεστέραν ἀπῄτησας· διὰ τοῦτό σοι κἀγὼ πολλὰ τῶν ἀξίων εἰρῆσθαι παρῆκα τῇ ἱστορίᾳ, μήτε πρὸς ὀλυμπιάδα ἐτῶν ταύτην ἀναμετρήσας, μήθ' ὡς ὁ συγγραφεὺς πεποίηκεν εἰς τὰς τοῦ ἔτους ὥρας αὐτὴν διελόμενος, ἀλλ' ἁπλῶς οὑτωσὶ τὰ ἐπικαιρότατα ταύτης ὑπαγορεύσας καὶ ὁπόσα μοι ἱστοροῦντι κατὰ μνήμην συνήθροισται. (Psellos *Chron*. VI, 73)

[18] On Kritobulos' imitation of Thucydides see Mastrodemetres, P. D.:Ἐσωτερικαὶ ἐπιδράσεις τοῦ Θουκυδίδου ἐπὶ τὸν Κριτοβούλου. *Ἀθηνᾶ* 65 (1961) 158–168; Reinsch (n. 5) 48–54.

[19] Thucydides' imitation is also apparent: Γέγραφε δὲ καὶ ταῦτα ὁ αὐτὸς Θουκυδίδης ᾿Αθηναῖος ἑξῆς, ὡς ἕκαστα ἐγένετο, … (Thuc. V, 26.1)

[20] "So I will describe [the events] one after the other, exactly as they occurred, I will choose my

The comparison of the two loci does not serve to suggest that Kritobulos knew Psellos' work, and that any direct relationship exists between *Chronographia* and *Syngraphēs historiōn* – since there is not –, it merely directs our attention to the considerations used by both authors that keep reoccurring in historical accounts of Greek historiography throughout the centuries, and not only connect the authors indirectly (and sometimes even directly), but also link the audiences listening to or reading their works. Furthermore, it is worth citing another relevant locus of Kritobulos' text. In his proem, the historiographer of Imbros makes a promise to later on describe the history of the Ottoman Empire. In his opinion, this is necessary because of the following reasons:

> εἰ γὰρ καὶ πολλοὶ περὶ τούτων εἰρήκασιν, ἀλλ' οὐ κ α τ ὰ τ ά ξ ι ν οὐδὲ κ α λ ῶ ς τε καὶ ὡ ς ἔ δ ε ι τὴν ἱστορίαν ξυνέθεσαν, ἀλλ' ὡς ἂν ἐπῆλθεν αὐτοῖς ἢ κατὰ τὸ δοκοῦν τῆς γνώμης ἢ τὸ ξυμβαῖνον τῆς μνήμης ἢ τῆς τῶν πραγμάτων πείρας εἶχον, τῆς δ' ἀκριβείας ὀλίγον ἐφρόντισαν.[21] (Krit. I, 2.2)

In the review, the general rules and phrases of writing like, for example, κατὰ τάξιν or καλῶς reoccur here, accompanied by expressions like ὡς ἔδει (*as it should have been*), that, similarly to the phrase μετὰ τοῦ προσήκοντος (*duly*) alludes to the fact that these rules defining *writing* historiography were based on a certain "consensus" – an unspoken agreement between historiographers and the audience mainly established on the grounds of classical traditions.

The lines of the cited text also bear testimony to this. Kritobulos – who, beyond assuming his role as a historiographer, here presents himself as a reader, since he formulated his criticism probably based on his experience as one – sets a Thucydidean tone: the historiographers who recount events in accordance with their opinion assumed to be right, what is more, they do so following their memories, fail to observe the requirements of the Thucydidean *akribeia* claiming that a historiographer must revise his own opinion and remembrance as well as that of others.[22]

words to suit deeds, and I will never separate the events from their time; I will also duly observe the established order as regards characters and times."

[21] "Although many have spoken about these, they did not do it correctly, and what is more, they failed to structure the results of their investigations as they should have. Instead, they compiled these as they were revealed to them: based on their own opinion that they thought was right, or as their memory preserved them, or according to their experience with things, caring little about precision."

[22] τὰ δ' ἔργα τῶν πραχθέντων ἐν τῷ πολέμῳ οὐκ ἐκ τοῦ παρατυχόντος πυνθανόμενος ἠξίωσα γράφειν, οὐδ' ὡς ἐμοὶ ἐδόκει, ἀλλ' οἷς τε αὐτὸς παρῆν καὶ παρὰ τῶν ἄλλων ὅσον δυνατὸν

The last locus can also be read in the *prooimion* – its analysis, in my opinion, may shed some light on the audience interested in history of 15th century Byzantium:

> δόκει δέ μοι καὶ διὰ τόδε οὐχ ἥκιστα ἀναγκαία εἶναι ἥδε ἡ νῦν ξυγγραφή· τὰ μὲν γὰρ παλαιὰ τῶν ἔργων πρεσβύτατα ὄντα καὶ μέγιστα δυσπαράδεκτά πώς εἰσι καὶ εἰς ἀκοὴν ἔρχεται μόγις τῷ χρόνῳ ὥσπερ γηράσκοντα καὶ διαπιστούμενα ἢ τῷ γε πολλῷ τῆς μνήμης συνεθισμῷ καὶ καταφρονεῖται· πᾶν γὰρ τὸ πλεονάζον ἐς κόρον ἥκει, κόρος δὲ ἀηδίαν φέρει. τὰ δὲ δὴ νῦν καινά τε ὄντα καὶ προσεχῆ καὶ ὡς γνώριμα εὐπαράδεκτά τέ ἐστι καὶ κατέχεται καὶ ὡς προσεχῆ μᾶλλον θαυμάζεται, καὶ τοσούτῳ μᾶλλον ὅσῳ καὶ μᾶλλον διαφέροντα ᾖ καὶ τὴν πίστιν ἔχοντα τῷ σαφεῖ καὶ γνωρίμῳ χαιρόντων τε τῶν ἀνθρώπων ὡς τὰ πολλὰ τοῖς καινοτέροις τῶν ἔργων καὶ τούτοις μᾶλλον ἐθελόντων ἕπεσθαι.[23] (Krit. I, 1.2)

Kritobulos' description shows that the audience of 15th century Byzantium might have turned away from studying the events of the remote past, and its interest seemed to focus on recent occurrences. However, the so called 'public opinion poll' above seems somehow contradicted by the fact that various antique historiographers and authors' manuscripts are preserved from the 14th and 15th century, among others, due to Kritobulos himself, who is known to have possessed a manuscript of Thucydides (*cod. Parisinus Graecus* 1636) and he himself copied Herodotus' work (*cod. Laurentianus* 70, 32), Arrian's work entitled *Anabasis Alexandrou* (*cod. Seragliensis* G. İ. 16) and Aelius Aristeides' writings (Ἐθνικὴ Βιβλιοθήκη cod. 1064).[24]

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ἀκριβείᾳ περὶ ἑκάστου ἐπεξελθών. ἐπιπόνως δὲ ηὑρίσκετο, διότι οἱ παρόντες τοῖς ἔργοις ἑκάστοις οὐ ταὐτὰ περὶ τῶν αὐτῶν ἔλεγον, ἀλλ' ὡς ἑκατέρων τις εὐνοίας ἢ μνήμης ἔχοι. (Thuc. I, 22.2–3) cf. Reinsch (n. 5) ad loc.

[23] "Among other reasons, I considered the present historiographical analysis necessary due to the following: being old and great, ancient deeds are inconceivable to a certain extent, and they are hardly heard, since with time they became anachronistic and unreliable or they were cited so many times that they became trivial and despised; since all exaggerations eventually lead to surfeit, and surfeit provokes disgust. Being new, recent and well known, the present events, however, can be understood easily and memory preserves them. Furthermore, the fact that they are recent provokes more admiration: the more precious and authentic they are due to being clear and well known, the more they are recognized; since people in general find joy in the latest deeds and are happy to follow these."

[24] See Reinsch (n. 5) 68–71.

Whatever the answer to the contradiction may be, perhaps Kritobulos' above cited observation offers some additions to the question of whether throughout the centuries Byzantium experienced a change in the interest on history, the different historical periods and genres, and if so, how this change evolved. While Kritobulos for some unknown reason arrived at the conclusion that his readers and listeners are rather interested in the recent past, in the 6th century, Procopius of Caesarea seemed to experience quite the opposite of this. In the preface of his monumental contemporary historiograpghical work entitled *Wars*, Procopius concludes the oratorical aggrandizement of his selected topic, emperor Justinian's wars with the following:

> πέπρακται γὰρ ἐν τούτοις μάλιστα πάντων ὧν ἀκοῇ ἴσμεν θαυμαστὰ οἷα, ἢν μή τις τῶν τάδε ἀναλεγομένων τῷ παλαιῷ χρόνῳ τὰ πρεσβεῖα διδοίη καὶ τὰ καθ' αὑτὸν οὐκ ἀξιοίη θαυμαστὰ οἴεσθαι.[25] (*Bell.* I, 1.7)

The historiographer goes on to say that these readers appreciate the fighters of the Trojan War more than the soldiers of present times. This is why Procopius begins a long explanation which serves to prove that the Justinian armed forces excel the fighters of the Trojan War in every aspect. However, at the end of the justification evoking Thucydides, Procopius states resignedly that "[s]till there are those who take into consideration none of these things, who reverence and worship the ancient times, and give no credit to modern improvements."[26]

Although I do not intend to draw farfetched and absolute conclusions from these two loci concerning the Byzantine audience of the 6th and 15th century, it may be worth noting that Procopius and Kritobulos' different experiences seem to partly reflect the spectrum of historiography in these two periods: since in the early Byzantine period not only did contemporary historiography flourish, but the ecclesiastic historiography originated from Eusebius also lived on, while, due to the world chronicles born at the end of the era, the type of historiography that went farther back in time also had its place. This colourfulness fades a bit by the Palaiologos dynasty period, which will witness the almost exclusive dominance of monographs of contemporary history.

[25] "For in them (sc. in these wars) more remarkable feats have been performed than in any other wars with which we are acquainted; unless, indeed, any reader of this narrative should give the place of honour to antiquity, and consider contemporary achievements unworthy to be counted remarkable." I cite the English translation of Dewing, H. B.

[26] εἰσὶ δὲ οἳ τούτων ἥκιστα ἐνθυμούμενοι σέβονται μὲν καὶ τεθήπασι τὸν παλαιὸν χρόνον, οὐδὲν δὲ ταῖς ἐπιτεχνήσεσι διδόασι πλέον. (*Bell.* I, 1.16)

By analysing some loci in one of the last Byzantine historiographical works, the present study offered *insight* into the relationship of Byzantine historiographers and their audience. Here, the word "insight" is not merely a figure of speech, but strives to draw attention to the undertakings and shortcomings of the paper. We know very little about the contemporary audience of historiography, one of the most significant genres in Byzantine literature. Various questions and even more uncertainties remain open before us. Nevertheless, one thing is sure: however great a historiographer may be, without his audience, he is close to nothing. Kritobulos, whose work lay forgotten in the Topkapi Serai's library until the middle 19th century, had this fate – maybe he should have followed Dionysius' advice after all.